



Collaborating With Youth-Serving Organizations to Enhance School Emergency Operations Plans

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

The cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of our nation's youth is cultivated by their interactions with various entities within a community, including schools and youth-serving organizations. Youth-serving organizations may be nonprofit or private and have varied missions and serve unique purposes, including but not limited to improved academic achievement, increased mental and behavioral health support, reduced risk-taking behaviors, increased career and technical education skills, equitable access to supplemental services, and so much more. Examples of youth-serving organizations may include but not be limited to local or national associations that serve youth, private organizations that operate afterschool and extracurricular programs, entities who operate pre-k and head start programs, skills-building and social clubs, local recreation centers, and more. These organizations can serve as critical community-based partners who can play a role in enhancing the capacity of schools and school districts to manage the before, during, and after phases of an emergency incident.

To develop sound emergency management practices and comprehensive emergency operations plans (EOPs), schools should incorporate community-based organizations and agencies into the planning process. Collaboration by schools with community partners can support implementation of the National Preparedness System mission areas—prevent, protect, mitigate, respond and recover—and help enhance the emergency preparedness process. The [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (School Guide) and [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (District Guide) note that creating and revising a model EOP is done by following a collaborative process. Collaboration is considered a planning basic or principle because it ensures that key community partners and members of the whole school community contribute their expertise to the EOP and ensure that it is comprehensive. Examples of these core partners includes law enforcement agencies, fire departments,

emergency medical services agencies, public and mental health agencies, other local government agencies, and private and nonprofit organizations that serve faith groups or youths. This fact sheet offers strategies that can be used by schools and school districts to create a solid foundation with youth-serving community-based organizations, expand their current networks of collaboration, and anticipate potential obstacles so that partnerships will be activated quickly and efficiently if a critical incident occurs.

The Value of Partnering with Youth-Serving Organizations

Parents and caregivers entrust schools, school districts, and their community partners with creating and sustaining safe and supportive environments that consider the whole child, whole school, and whole community. Youth-serving organizations are ideal

partners for schools and school districts, because they have demonstrated a commitment to helping students develop trusted relationships with adults and members of their community. Youth-serving organizations may offer unique perspectives into the perceptions of students, families, and caregivers about a school or school district's safety posture, which can serve as a benefit to schools and school districts as they develop and revise plans to align with the unique needs of each school community.

The structure of youth-serving organizations varies widely. Some may have an existing relationship with the school or school district and operate meetings and activities within school buildings or on school grounds. For example, schools may partner with local emergency management agencies to offer Teen CERT courses for students that take place in a school classroom or gymnasium. Other organizations may convene periodic activities during specific times of the school year and collaborate with the school in offering volunteer service hours to students; the activities conducted may take place off school grounds but involve use of [school-based transportation services](#). Schools may host an emergency preparedness camp during the summer, for example, in collaboration with a state-based emergency preparedness partner, such as the state school safety center. No matter the structure and purpose of the relationship, when schools and youth-serving organizations develop a relationship that includes a commitment to ensure safe spaces for youth, it can help reinforce a culture of emergency preparedness within the whole school community.



Strategies for Developing Collaborative Partnerships

Identify partners and include them in the planning process

The first step towards ensuring that EOPs are strengthened by effective community collaboration is to identify the essential partners early in the planning and development process. The formation of a collaborative planning team is [Step 1](#) of the federally recommended six-step planning process featured in the *School Guide* and *District Guide*.

By establishing the planning team and cooperative working relationships in advance of any incidents, schools and youth-serving organizations will develop a level of trust and familiarity, learn each other's terminology, and be able to streamline communication in situations when every second counts.

Youth-serving organizations can provide key support as schools and school districts continue to work through [Step 2](#), during which they determine which threats and hazards to include on their list and prioritize. Leaders and staff within these organizations often have an awareness of trends happening within the school community, cultural differences that may exist, and successful strategies that can be used when engaging students in emergency preparedness or other types of efforts. Capacity assessments conducted during Step 2 in the six-step planning process can help reveal required areas of support and gaps in services that youth-serving organizations can fill. While each community is unique, tapping into the expertise and insight of youth-serving organizations will broaden the scope and capacities of the collaboration as EOPs are developed, tested, and refined.

Respect each partner's mission and contribution

While schools and school districts may be catalysts for collaboration, it is important to recognize that each partner brings its own unique mission and orientation to the partnership. For example, some youth-serving organizations may target students representing certain demographics (ages, genders, ethnicities, languages, etc.) while others may offer services to all students within a school or school district. Depending on



process is an effective strategy for ensuring continuity and consistency of services. Authorization for all partnerships, however, should come from individuals with decision-making authority at the highest level of district and school administrations, even if other designees in their respective organizations are slated to fill ongoing contact roles. This way, local groups will be less likely to encounter challenges in trying to collaborate with larger systems such as regional emergency management and planning networks and state agencies. Learn more about [Collaborating With K-12 Administrators: Engaging Leadership in School Emergency Operations Plans](#).

Strategies to Consider When Collaborating With Youth-Serving Organizations

Decide on a common goal

At the most fundamental level, schools, school districts, and potential partners share a vision for safe schools and communities and are united by this common goal. As school districts begin to reach out to various entities, each may have a distinct interest or a unique contribution, but the unifying concept—comprehensive emergency management—should always be in focus. Organizations will usually commit a significant amount of time, and perhaps tangible resources, to the partnership. During this time, it is important that they be free to articulate a sense of purpose that not only validates their participation but also effectively represents this affiliation in the larger community. Each partner essentially becomes an ambassador for the school safety framework and should have a clear understanding of the big picture, seeing how its unique contributions fit in the comprehensive EOP.

Create procedures to meet a variety of needs

Procedures may be beneficial for more than one community partner's emergency management efforts with the school. For example, including youth-serving organizations in the development of behavioral threat assessment protocols will increase the points of contact through which early warning signs may be identified. An example of a cross-cutting functional procedure related to core partners is visitor sign-in protocols to limit access and discourage intruders. These same

the funding source of a particular organization, the partnership between schools, school districts, and youth-serving organizations may be limited to a certain period of time or only allow a focus on specific mission areas, such as prevention or recovery. In some cases, youth-serving organizations may include leadership across multiple agencies or entities, requiring that schools and school districts understand the unique roles of each agency/entity in contributing to the partnership. The district, the schools, and the community partners should seek to understand, appreciate, and respect everyone's contributions and points of reference, and be open to conversation and compromise at each stage of collaboration.

Obtain school administration buy-in and tapping into established connections

Schools may be in the position of beginning emergency management-related dialogues with community partners; however, it is important to secure the cooperation at the highest possible level of school and district administrations. In many states, superintendents are required to meet annually with school board members and heads of law enforcement and emergency management agencies to review and update EOPs. These meetings may be an opportunity for those partners to identify new entities with which the school district can collaborate, including youth-serving organizations with which a school or school district may partner. Bringing cultivated relationships into a school's emergency management planning

procedures will be referred to by staff employed by partnering organizations when conducting activities on school grounds. Understanding the various priorities from each partner's vantage point allows schools and relevant partners to look at an issue from different facets and design corresponding protocols that are more efficient because they satisfy a number of concerns, and in some cases, mandated requirements. Partnerships create venues to hear others' concerns, value stakeholders' input, develop mutual trust and confidence, and work toward the common goal of creating safe and supportive schools.

Delineate specific roles and responsibilities

If the roles and responsibilities of partners are not specified in advance, mobilizing community collaborations and relationships in a critical situation can create the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding. Many school districts create formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that define the roles and responsibilities of each partner, delineate expectations, and describe a method of resolving potential disputes in order to ensure equitable participation between or among partners. Such agreements are especially useful for districts that include more than one municipal jurisdiction or for consortiums that are created around the expectation of shared resources. Agreements with either core or non-traditional partners should define any preliminary expectations, such as a meeting schedule to review and update plans, the number, type, and frequency exercises, and any training that the school or partnering agency or organization is to provide. Schools should be mindful that, for any partner, participation in meetings and drills involves scheduling, personnel, and, frequently, compensation for staff. It is

best to identify the level and scope of involvement and sources of funding in advance.

Addressing Challenges to Creating Partnerships

There are few drawbacks to establishing and maintaining solid partnerships, but there may be challenges. Outreach to and inclusion of potential youth-serving organization partners should be broad and inclusive of all potential youth voices. While omissions can sometimes occur, periodic partnership reviews and discussions of changing requirements, evaluation of practices, and ongoing communication will ensure that gaps are addressed and opportunities to enhance emergency management planning are taken into account. Another consideration is synchronization of needs and services. In an emergency that is contained within a school or school district, mobilizing partnerships will increase the effectiveness of the response, but when a critical incident is community-wide or larger, available resources can be spread thin. Tabletops and exercises that involve multiple partnering organizations will help test these various interfaces in advance. For example, when conducting a tabletop exercise on family reunification, there may be a need to involve those youth-serving organizations with whom a school is partnering to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the courses of action to follow in the event an incident takes place outside of school hours or within a setting outside of the school building. When partners plan together, communities can begin to problem solve and build strategies around the allocation of more limited resources or commodities.



Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Building Blocks to School Safety: A Toolkit for K-12 Schools and School Districts for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#), Publication
- [The Planning Process At a Glance](#), Web Page
- [Building Youth Preparedness and School Safety Capacity by Integrating Educational Initiatives](#), Fact Sheet
- [Working With the Whole Community to Manage Emergency Incidents That May Impact Education Agencies](#), Web Page
- [Tool Box](#), Web Page
- [EOP Interactive Tools](#), Web Page
- [Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans](#), Fact Sheet
- [Collaborating With K-12 Administrators: Engaging Leadership in School Emergency Operations Plans](#), Fact Sheet

- [Collaboration and Community Partnerships: Strategies for Effective School and Higher Ed Emergency Operations Plan Development](#), Fact Sheet

Training Opportunities — REMS TA Center

- [Developing Memoranda of Understanding \(MOUs\) for Enhancing Emergency Preparedness in the School Setting](#), Online Course
- [Developing and Enhancing Memoranda of Understanding \(MOUs\) With Your Community Partners](#), Specialized Training Package

Further Reading — EOP Development

- [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (School Guide), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Justice, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Health and Human Services)
- [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (District Guide), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education, Homeland Security, Justice, and Health and Human Services)



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